Choosing priorities

Countryside Stewardship is a competitive scheme and funding is limited. Not all eligible applicants will be offered a grant. This guide will help applicants choose the options that will increase their chance of success.

Countryside Stewardship applications are scored - both top priorities and other priorities (listed in the boxes below) score points. Applicants should select at least one top priority. Choosing other priorities will improve an application’s score.

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**Biodiversity - top priorities**

**Priority habitats**

Applicants should choose land management options and capital works that maintain, restore and create priority habitats and support priority species that depend on these habitats.

Priority habitats to be maintained include:

- lowland calcareous grassland
- lowland meadow
- wood pasture and parkland with veteran trees
- ancient and native woodland
- traditional orchards (including cherry orchards)
- lowland heath
- floodplain grazing marsh
- riparian habitats associated with priority rivers and lakes
- arable field margins

Priority habitats (especially projects to enlarge existing sites or help join up habitat networks) to be restored include:

- lowland calcareous grassland
- lowland meadow
- wood pasture and parkland with veteran trees
- ancient and native woodland
- traditional orchards (including cherry orchards)
- lowland heath
- floodplain grazing marsh
- riparian habitats associated with priority rivers and lakes

Priority habitat creation to extend or link priority habitat to increase connectivity and reduce fragmentation. In particular, create priority habitat that will also contribute significantly to improvements in:

- water quality
- air quality
- flood and coastal risk management

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Restore or maintain SSSIs that include features eligible for options – this includes options that will reduce diffuse water and air pollution effects.

Priority species

Managing priority habitats will create the habitat needs for many of the priority species associated with this area. In particular by providing such essential elements as bare ground, areas of scrub and varied sward structures which will help these species thrive.

This area also has a number of priority species that need tailored management and advice. Applicants should choose land management options and capital works that meet the specific needs of the following priority species:

- lapwing
- turtle dove
- corn bunting
- willow tit
- noble chafer
- Duke of Burgundy
- liquorice piercer
- striped lychnis
- carline thistle leafhopper
- orange-fruited elm-lichen
- pheasants-eye
- ground-pine
- brown galingale
• starfruit
• red-tipped cudweed
• broad-leaved cudweed
• wild candytuft
• pennyroyal
• small-flowered catchfly
• greater water parsnip
• broad-fruited corn salad
• shepherds needle
• corn buttercup

Woodland bird assemblage

Parts of this area are targeted for their variety of woodland birds. Natural England has assessed the area as being nationally significant where 4 or more of the following species occur:

• lesser spotted woodpecker
• tree pipit
• redstart
• pied flycatcher
• spotted flycatcher
• wood warbler
• marsh tit
• lesser redpoll
• hawfinch

In these areas applicants should choose land management options and capital works that maintain or enhance conditions for woodland birds.

Arable plant assemblage

This area has cultivated land that may contain nationally threatened and declining populations of arable plants. The correct management of these areas will help these species thrive and help their populations increase.

The Wild Pollinator and Farm Wildlife Package
This package is a collection of scheme options that benefit wild pollinators, farmland birds (such as grey partridge, tree sparrow and yellowhammer) and other farm wildlife (such as arable plants, great crested newt, bats and brown hare).

The package is voluntary, but an application will have a greater chance of success if options from the package are chosen.

The options provide the essential resources (especially year-round food, shelter and nesting places) that wild pollinators, birds and farm wildlife need to survive and reproduce. These include:

- sowing nectar flower mixes
- increasing flowers on grassland
- sowing winter bird food mixes
- managing hedgerows and other key farm habitats (like ponds and ditches)

**Mid-Tier**

Applicants can choose from groups of options for different farm types – arable, mixed or pastoral. Typically, the options should be applied over a minimum of 3% to 5% of the farmed land on the holding.

**Higher Tier**

An application will have a greater chance of success if the holding has already helped wildlife thrive under previous schemes. For example, where a Higher Level Stewardship agreement is coming to an end, and from other areas where priority farmland species are present.

Applicants can choose from similar groups of options, tailored to their holding, in consultation with a Natural England adviser. Typically, the options will cover a minimum of 5% to 10% of farmed land to target a broader range of farmland species and habitats.

Applying the right combination of these options over at least 3% of the farmed land or a holding will bring benefits to farm wildlife.

**Water - top priorities**

**Water quality**

Applicants should consider options and capital works in the water quality options table that address:
• nitrate, phosphate and sediment in the South Chilterns, Thames, Colne, Upper Lee, Ivel and Ouzel and Milton Keynes catchments
• pesticides affecting the Thames Catchment

This includes:

• phosphate and sediment in the catchments to the Henlow Brook, Kingsey Cuttle Brook and tributaries at Thame
• phosphate in the catchment to the Hexton Brook, Ivel, Upper and River Flit and Whistle Brook
• sediment in the catchment to the Stevenage Brook, Ver and the Wye
• groundwater drinking water sources: Sheeplands, near Twyford and King’s Walden, near Luton affected by nitrates and Harpsden, affected by pesticides

These options help improve water quality by controlling the source or the movement of potential pollutants, including:

• nutrients from fertilisers, manures and organic materials
• sediment from soil erosion and run-off
• pesticides from their use and disposal

Flood and Coastal Risk Management

An application will have a greater chance of success if applicants select options for flood and coastal risk issues in the priority areas of the:

• Lee, Gade and Misbourne catchments
• Hughenden Stream/Wye and Wye North Arm catchment, particularly the upstream area north of High Wycombe and north-east of the M40
• Wendover Brook, Castle Park Stream and Blue Sky Brook catchments, particularly the upstream area south of Wendover and Western Turville
• River Hiz at Hitchin, particularly upstream of Hitchin
• Ippolytes Brook catchment

Applicants should choose options from the flood risk table that:

• reduce the amount and rate of surface water run-off
• reduce soil erosion
• slow the movement of floodwaters on floodplains
**Historic environment - top priorities**

Applicants should choose active management which ensures the long-term survival of historic environment features and protects them against damage and decay. In particular some of the biggest land management threats in this area are from:

- arable cultivation
- lack of management
- scrub and tree growth

The following features are a high priority for active management in this area:

- designated features - archaeological features of national significance (Scheduled Monuments) and Registered Parks and Gardens (RPG)
- designated and undesignated traditional farm buildings and non-domestic historic buildings on holdings
- undesignated historic and archaeological features of high significance which are part of the Selected Heritage Inventory for Natural England (SHINE)

As part of your application you should consider options and capital works to:

- revert archaeological sites under cultivation to permanent grass
- reduce damaging cultivation and harvesting practices through minimum tillage or direct drilling where this provides a suitable level of protection
- remove scrub and bracken from archaeological or historic features
- maintain below-ground archaeology under permanent uncultivated vegetation or actively manage earthworks, standing stones and structures as visible ‘above ground’ features
- maintain and restore historic water management systems, including those associated with water meadows and designed water bodies
- restore historic buildings that are assessed as a priority in the area
- maintain or restore Registered Parks and Gardens, including structures or features that contribute to the design intentions or feel of the parkland or provide for their biodiversity and amenity value
Woodland - top priorities

Woodland management

Climate change, pests (such as deer and grey squirrels) and various diseases threaten woodland. Applicants’ proposals will need to address such threats where present.

Certain types of woodland are a high priority for bringing into management, including:

- protected woodland – those designated for their national biodiversity value
- priority woodland habitat – other unmanaged broadleaved woodland
- priority species – target woodland within priority areas for woodland priority species
- planted ancient woodland site (PAWS) restoration – conversion of conifer plantations on ancient woodland sites to broadleaf woodland within priority woodland habitat networks
- United Kingdom Forestry Standard – unmanaged conifer woodland within catchments subject to eutrophication and acidification, both to reduce pressures on the water environment and improve biodiversity

All management should comply with the United Kingdom Forestry Standard and other relevant guidance such as ‘Managing ancient and native woodland in England’.

Woodland planting

High priority objectives for new woodland planting include:

- biodiversity – planting to buffer and link existing woodlands and other semi-natural open habitats within priority woodland habitat networks
- water quality – planting designed to reduce and intercept diffuse pollution from agriculture
- flood risk – planting designed to increase infiltration of heavy rain into the ground, reduce erosion, or slow the flow of floodwaters on floodplains

Landscape
Each application is likely to include a range of landscape features whose restoration should form an important part of agreements. Top priority in the area is the maintenance and restoration of features that will enhance the pattern and scale of the landscape and add to the area’s ‘sense of place’.

Top priorities in this area for landscape are:

- hedgerows
- hedgerow trees
- in-field trees
- permanent grassland
- field margins and buffers

**Multiple environmental benefits**

Applicants should look to provide for multiple priorities by selecting options that achieve multiple environmental benefits.

In this area, the greatest opportunity to achieve multiple objectives is by:

- creating species-rich chalk grassland in locations where this will protect historic features and semi-natural habitat along the escarpment between Tring and Shillington, increasing habitat connectivity, reducing soil erosion and rates of surface run-off to benefit water quality, biodiversity, flood risk and landscape character
- choosing options such as swales, sediment traps, erosion and run-off control, in-field riparian management strips and low-input grassland adjacent to watercourses along the chalk stream valleys in the South Chilterns, Thame, Upper Colne, the Upper Lee, Ivel and Ouzel and Milton Keynes catchments, in locations where this can reduce soil erosion and reduce rates of surface run-off to enhance water quality, biodiversity and support flood risk management
- increasing nectar provision for pollinating insects by creating and restoring species-rich grasslands, traditional orchards, diverse field margins, traditional hedgerows and scrub in the South Chilterns, Thame, Colne, Upper Lee, Ivel and Ouzel and Milton Keynes catchments where the this will enhance landscape character and protect historic features whilst benefiting soil quality, biodiversity, water quality and flood risk management
- enhancing existing woodlands and expanding woodland cover in locations where well managed woodland can benefit landscape character, biodiversity, water quality and flood risk, in addition to wider climate change, economic and social benefits - key locations include:
  - the River Bulbourne
  - the Chiltern ridgeline
the Thames River corridor
Luton and surrounding land

Other priorities

Applicants should select at least 1 of the top priorities. However, applicants can also select other priorities, as this will increase the score of the application.

Water quality

Applicants should consider options and capital works in the water quality options table that address:

- sediment in the Mimram, Cut and Maid, Colne, Upper Lee and Sulham Brook
- phosphate and sediment in the catchments to the Thame and South Chilt
- phosphate in the catchments to the Chalgrove Brook, Scotsgrove Brook, Thames - Wallingford to Caversham
- surface water drinking water sources from the Thames (Cookham to Egham) affected by pesticides
- Alpine Meadow SSSI affected by nitrate

These options help improve water quality by controlling the source or the movement of potential pollutants.

Historic environment

The following historic environment features are lower priorities:

- designated and undesignated traditional farm buildings
- undesignated SHINE features of medium and low Significance
- priority undesignated historic parklands

Woodland Management

Woodlands not included in the top priority categories listed above are a lower priority for management but may still be supported.
Woodland Planting

Areas are prioritised for new planting based on their potential to create biodiversity and water benefits.

Woodland planting schemes are scored depending on where the proposed scheme is in relation to the opportunity maps for woodland planting in England and how well the planting design will benefit biodiversity and water.

Other priorities for appropriately designed biodiversity schemes exist across the whole of England. Opportunities for new woodland planting for water only exist in certain parts of England.

Climate change

By choosing land management options and capital works which support the management of the vulnerable features and habitats listed in this statement, including where vulnerabilities are increased by climate change, applicants will support the resilience of biodiversity, water and other scheme priorities to the impacts of climate change, which is a cross-cutting objective of the scheme.